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ABSTRACT

Looking at rural Australia, this paper addresses the issue of providing adequate resources to create high quality and diversified higher education environments and the need for more data on the quality of rural student life. A review of the literature shows the underrepresentation of rural students in higher education; rural barriers to participation in higher education; and the nature of the student experience in U.K. and U.S. colleges. Researchers conclude that top quality institutions can be created through rigorous planning and creative action. A case study generated data on aspects of rural students' lives by addressing issues of childhood, schooling, enrollment, reference groups, prior learning, motivation, career plans, approaches to learning, formal and informal aspects of the university, significant others, university values, and student suggestions for improvements. Semi-structured and informal interviews explored these areas with five female students at La Trobe University in Australia. Most of this paper entails detailed interview responses. It is concluded that relatively high levels of student satisfaction may be achieved without massive levels of support, depending on individual perspectives, prior expectations, and socialization. Contains 49 references. (SAS)

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Dr. Anthony Potts

Student University Learning Environments - An Australian Provincial Case Study

Introduction

In the editorial of *The Times Higher Education Supplement* of December 13, 1996, the editor makes a number of points. Firstly the editor quotes from an OECD study ***Education At a Glance*** and warns "against channelling lower-achieving students into educational ghettos" instead of providing "adequate resources to create high-quality and diversified options". Secondly, the editor recommends that there is need to gather more data on the quality of student life. Thirdly the point is made that "there is an almost total lack of international data on students' lives". This paper makes a contribution to addressing these issues. It looks at the issue of rural university learning environments in a country that has had a mass system of higher education for only a short period of time and now is grappling with funding cutbacks. Secondly, it provides some relevant data on aspects of rural student life and thirdly, it adds to the literature that will assist international comparisons.

The Literature

Connell (1993: 427-429) notes that despite Australia's endeavours to make Australian education more democratic and more inclusive of all social groups higher it is not a completely mass system. Those from lower socio-economic and rural backgrounds are still under-represented (Connell, 1993: 426-427). A number of important studies highlight the problem of increasing the proportion of non-middle class and rural students in higher education. For example Anderson, et al. (1980: 199) pointed out the under-

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representation of the rural community and other lower socio-economic groups and noted (Anderson, et al. 1980: 200):

> *There still much social inequality and economic hardship in society but its roots are deep in the social fabric ... Most of the socially handicapping circumstances have had their effect well before students even get to the point of seeking a place in higher education.*

Anderson and Vernoon (1983: 170), Abbot-Chapman, Hughes and Wild (1986), Birtles (1987), and Crocket (1987) have also noted the unrepresentative backgrounds of university students. *Austudy Rural Inequities* (1990) found that students from rural areas of Australia were severely disadvantaged with respect to proceeding to tertiary level study. They were three times less likely to proceed to such study compared to their city counterparts. This could be attributed to the lower high school completion rates in country high schools, the lack of resources in some of these schools, the high teacher turnover, the lower aspirations of country students, the lack of role models for country students, the lack of relevant information for country students, the lack of financial assistance schemes which students could access because of an assets test on parents' incomes, the difficulty of finding relevant information and the distance involved in undertaking tertiary study. Stanley and Munn (1993) found that rural women nominated issues of distance, time, costs, transport and child care as inhibiting them from participating in higher education. Suggested to assist improve access were better provision of information and financial support. Hawker (1996: 6-7) found that the obstacles to participation in university education identified as far back as 1980 still applied to rural Australians. He noted in particular that rural students had two thirds the participation rates in higher education compared to their city counterparts, while students in what were classified as remote areas had fifty per cent; forty-eight per cent of the students refused Austudy were

from family farms. Lamb (1997) found that participation in higher education varied widely depending on place of residence. Females living in the city had a 48.4% attendance rate at university compared to 43.6 % for rural females. The respective figures for males were 47.4% and 37.5%.

Lewis (1984: 1) observes that in Britain little is known" about the world of university students ... few people in this country have ever had direct experience of the university world". Lewis (1984: 160) suggests that there is a need to take into account the political, social and institutional dimensions "in the formation of the traditional academic perspective" and to recognise "the extra-academic dimensions of the student's world".

Haselgrove (1994:40) refers to the fact that British researchers have only a "partial picture" when looking at the student experience. He suggests that it is important for educational researchers to explore the "other" segment of students' lives.

McNay (1994: 175), in words very similar to those describing an earlier Australian situation, noted that in the United Kingdom:

> *Student's own prior experience and learning will also interact with what is offered by institutions to affect the individual's experience of higher education. As part of "more means different" many more students may need greater learning support but the growth in numbers reduces the time available to staff to give it. The experience, then may be more alienating and may be a reinforcement of failure because of higher education institutions lack of understanding of the new higher education students. Many institutions, even some espousing access, seem to believe that all adaptations should be done by the students themselves who somehow transform themselves into traditional students, and therefore offer traditional 'fare'*

Most recently Swain (1996: 5) reports research that shows that most school leavers have only vague knowledge of universities and often

select universities "on a brand name basis" with the image of the city being vital.

In America Chickering (1972: 157) noted that different university environments make a difference to student development. Feldman and Newcomb (1973: Vol 1, 5) claimed that if faculty were to make a difference to the student experience, then it had to be complemented by that of the influences of student peers. They also observed that the greatest impacts of university learning environments occurred in small colleges, where there was a relative homogeneity of staff and student bodies, plus opportunity for continuing interaction, not completely formal, among students and between students and faculty (Feldman and Newcomb, 1973, Vol. 1: 6). They noted the impact of university environments was conditioned by the background and personality of the student; that whatever the characteristics of an individual that propel him/her towards certain educational settings, attending college, choosing a particular institution, becoming a member in particular group of peers, those characteristics were reinforced and enlarged by the experiences undertaken in those environments (Feldman and Newcomb, 1973, Vol 1: 333). Just as importantly they argued that "processes of attracting and selecting students are interdependent with processes of impact...*college's impacts begin before students arrive*" Feldman and Newcomb (1973, Vol. 1: 334). [Emphasis added].

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991: 637) note that with respect to four year colleges in the USA where students attend college matters less "than what happens to them after they enrol" and some non-elite four year institutions could compete with more prominent and resource-rich institutions. They suggest that the quality of undergraduate education

"may be much more a function of what colleges do programatically than it is of the human, financial, and educational resources at their disposal" (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991: 637). To understand the effects of the impacts of colleges on students there is a need to focus on factors such as curricular experiences, the quality of the teaching, the nature of the peer group, extra curricular activities and the extent to which the institution enhances and facilitates student academic and social development (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991: 596).

Chickering and Reisser (1993:454) summarise the preceding concerns when they state "***the most critical task of higher education for the next twenty-five years is to create and maintain educationally powerful environments***" [Emphasis added]. They then discuss ways of conceptualising the major elements in these learning environments and their interactions using models from Pascarella (1985) and Weidman (1989). They suggest looking at issues such as student background characteristics, parental socialisation, collegiate experience and outcomes of college using a socialisation framework. They suggest that this can be useful as a starting point for institutions endeavouring to capture their own individual characteristics (Chickering and Reisser, 1993: 455). Following this they put forward a series of questions that are used to probe the various dimensions of student learning environments in this paper

They claim, that on the basis of their research, all institutions:

> *can create and sustain educationally powerful environments. We do not have to wait for that large endowment. We do not have to recruit and find the wherewithal to employ a highly credentialled, well-published faculty from 'he best' graduate schools. We do not need a massive public relations campaign that gives us widespread recognition. We do not need to raise our selection criteria whenever we get enrolment pressure. We can create top-quality institutions through rigorous*

planning and creative action (Chickering and Reisser, 1993: 455).

In Australia, at least for rural and regional institutions, like the one that is the subject of this paper, there are few options other than those outlined by Chickering and Reisser (1993) as there is unlikely to be a massive injection of funds by Governments (Gibson, 1997: 25) despite the special pleadings of regional campuses (Healey, 1997: 29).

This paper generates data on aspects of rural students' lives and contributes to the discussion on rural university learning environments. It does so by considering key issues of a group of students who are attending university. The issues include: childhood, schooling, enrolling at university, reference groups, importance of prior learning, motivation, career plans, approaches to learning, formal and informal aspects of university, significant others, values that the university espouses and students' suggestions for improvement of their university experience.

The Site of the Case Study

The university campus is in a Victorian provincial city of approximately 80,000 people. It has a student enrolment of about 4,000. The majority of the students come from rural areas of the state and are from rural working class or lower middle class families. Seventy-five per cent of students are the first of their family to attend university and this percentage is higher than the national average (Pitkethly, 1996:1). Most of the students undertake vocational degrees in teacher education, science, engineering, business or nursing.

Methodology

There were two main data gathering techniques namely semi-structured interviews and informal interviews. The aim was to explore aspects of student learning environments from the students' frame of reference (Filstead, 1970: Bogdan and Biklen, 1992).

Originally, it was intended to interview fifty students in all, that is ten from each of the faculties of Education, Arts, Business, Health Sciences and Sciences. Human Ethics Committee permission was obtained from the university's committee on the basis that the students would be asked the questions proposed by Chickering and Reisser (1993). Participation would be completely voluntary. I contacted the Deans of the five faculties to seek their permission which was granted. Two were especially interested in the project and made every effort to facilitate the it.

I interviewed year two students. This was done for two reasons. First, these students would be able to reflect on at least one year of university level study and secondly, I did not teach year two students. Any inhibition that students may have had in talking to me because I currently taught them was therefore lessened. At the same time I had previously taught, in first year, some of the ones that I interviewed and so was able to probe issues reported.

Permission to attend year two classes to explain the nature of the project and to ask for participants was obtained. Staff taking these classes urged students to participate on the basis that some of the results could be used to improve the delivery of services. Notices explaining the research and asking for volunteers were placed around the campus. Key staff contacted students who had expressed interest in taking part in the research.

Despite all this I ended up with only five volunteers. A long way short of my hoped for fifty! Two were business studies students and three were education students. One from education had also completed a business qualification prior to starting her teaching degree and had also done units in the Faculty of Arts.

Puzzled as to why the lack of response I asked one lecture group why and they said "If you pay us we will volunteer!"

This was a new situation to me. In any case I had no funds to pay for participation, it was unlikely that I would be able to obtain any and it was too late for this project to obtain them.

In the end then I interviewed the five students. Interviews averaged approximately an hour. They were done in my office at a time of the student's choosing. I then transcribed the interviews. Transcripts were then analysed by reading and reading and searching for key themes and negative cases. The models proposed by Pascarella and Weidman were kept in mind as explanatory devices. Following is a discussion of aspects of the learning environments of this group of students.

Student Background Characteristics

Childhood

A happy and supportive childhood featured in all students' biographies. Contrary to stereotypes of working class and rural people that portray them as not valuing education and lacking in aspirations for their children these parents had high expectations for their offspring.

Parents held schooling to be important. They had encouraged their children to do well. Some had selected private schools as they had believed these would provide a better education and because this was what children wanted. This entailed financial sacrifice on the parents' part.

A home life that was focused on education was linked directly to university studies by Tracey. She noted that "one of my best subjects here is Children's Literature because I think I've read so much that I think I know exactly what I am looking for". Parents who were "the typical people you wanted in High School" being house and school captains influenced student's lives. Individuals wanted to show parents that they could excel too. However, in childhood one also discovered that in spite of parental encouragement and assistance one could still leave school prematurely.

Penny noted that although there had been great stress on educational achievement in her family it had not always had positive outcomes. "I think that is why my sister and I have had problems as Mum has pushed too much ... and Dad ... even if you tried your hardest [he has this] you can do better sort of attitude"

These student's childhood experiences were important in other ways too. This could be related directly to the issue of rurality. For Maree the small size of the town she lived in meant it did not have a preschool and hence she missed out on that. However her mother had worked part-time at the local primary school in an ancillary position and consequently "she got a lot of educational stuff for me to do and so I started learning when I was really young". When her parents started their own small business she and her brother had to assume more

responsibility for themselves from a very young age. The result was that she became very independent in all aspects of her life. This influence stayed with her. This was paradoxical in that she wished her parents had encouraged her more than they had and then she would have perhaps achieved more. But she wondered if, with her fiercely independent nature, she would have heeded their advice.

Strong achievement motivation was directly linked to the rural environment experienced as a child. This could be attributed growing up in small towns where most students left school at the end of Year 10 to work in uninspiring employment. For example Tracey noted:

> *It is nothing for them to go and work in K Mart or Macdonald's and they think that will be a great job and they do not really think of the future. I mean do you really want to be doing that in 20 years time. All I could think of was get out and improve myself and come back in ten years time with the car and the man and the clothes and just go ha ha ha and that has been the motivation.*

There were also other important influences for Tracey. Because of her father's employment in the Police Force in rural areas of the state her family moved frequently and it was hard for her to maintain friends. But she could now recall many different school teachers and schools. This was "helping me now that I am in my course to actually look at all the teachers I have had and the things they used to use with us".

Influence of Schooling

Small rural primary schools forced one to develop independence already fostered by the home environment. One could achieve in rural primary schools despite of, or because of, their smallness and despite some less

than happy and stimulating times. Small size did not however, mean happiness nor friendships easily formed.

Primary schooling was very positive for some. There were skilled and understanding teachers and some were fortunate to win a scholarship to high school. Tracey remembered primary schooling chiefly in terms of "the teachers I liked". She thought they derived a great deal of enjoyment from their careers and thought it would be fulfilling to have such a career. She now realised though that "it was not as simple or as enjoyable as it appeared to her as a child"!

The experience of high school was not a happy time. Perhaps it had something to do with the transition from small rural primary schools with a family atmosphere to larger and more impersonal educational environments of high schools. Some wondered if it was the stark contrast in teaching style between primary and secondary school where in the latter more effort was put into explanation. Tracey for instance found the teaching style unsatisfactory noting that the teachers "wanted to dictate to you rather than teach".

For Jasmine while the teachers and the teaching were satisfactory secondary schooling was marked by her efforts to overcome chronic shyness, to make friends and to ask for assistance. Penny had different but no less important personal concerns associated with severe sibling rivalry and parental separation. Consequently secondary schooling was a problematic time for her. She was forced to accept more and more responsibilities at home and at one stage her parents contemplated withdrawing her from school.

Maree was luckier than the others. Her secondary schooling was more positive. Not a Catholic herself, she attended a Catholic School which she found a good choice as "it was a very caring atmosphere ... [and] the teachers were very supportive of you especially towards the end of year 11 and 12".

Secondary schooling provided important significant others. For Penny these were the Principal and Year Level Co-ordinator. When experiencing parental pressure to leave they encouraged her not to and expressed faith in her ability to succeed. She "was really impressed" by this. Tracey had one particularly impressive history teacher who had "a passion for what he was teaching and I just thought ... how great it would be to be able to do something like that to help children reach their full potential".

There were other important influences for Tracey during High School. She noted that it did not pay to appear too intelligent as this normally brought derision from her classmates. Consequently she became unusually quite and withdrawn. Here she was like Maree but for different reasons. Her coping strategies were probably different too as by Year 12 she decided "well stuff it" and rather than conform to peer group pressure she became an active class participant. She noted:

> *That brought back much self esteem because although all the other people in your class think 'Oh teacher's pet you answer everything' they also give you that respect 'wow she's smart' and that type of thing that to me brings a lot of self esteem. That helps you become what you want to. You've actually got the determination and the guts to go and do it.*

Enrolling at La Trobe, Bendigo

Williams (1975: 9) notes the that country and city are seen as opposites. He observes that:

> *On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace innocence and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation.*

Riseman (in Severino, 1996: 293) claims that in America prejudice against the alleged corrupt city and in favour of the supposedly pure and innocent country has permeated American thought and influenced the development of American colleges, often established in small country towns because of "a specifically American fear of the city and its corruption". The city was seen to be alienating and anonymous. Chipman (1997: 19) notes a difference in Australia when he writes of urbism. This he sees as "a distinctively Australian prejudice; the metropolitan capital city attitude that if something is really good it must be capital city based" (Chipman, 1997: 19).

The decision to enrol at La Trobe University, Bendigo was bound up with the individual biographies of each of these individual students. The decision was part of a range of issues at a particular point in time. Some of them had a long history. Within the decisions of these individuals to enrol at a regional university there can be seen echoes of some of William's, Severino's and Chipman's observations. These students selected a regional university compared to a city-based one because of the negative images associated with the city of Melbourne and its universities.

Prue's decision went back to her leaving school in Year 10 and a period of working in a clothing factory. Moving to Bendigo City as a single parent with a family to support, she realised how much she hated clothing factory work which was all she had done. Always having wanted to be a primary teacher, impulsively she inquired whether she might be admitted to the

course as a mature-age student. She was much to her surprise. For Prue coming to Bendigo enabled her to escape from the city of Melbourne and much that it represented.

Tracey's decision was linked to her strong determination to make something of her life in comparison to her counterparts in her home town. Comparing herself to those people she was determined not to end up like them and remain in the same town. "I chose La Trobe, Bendigo because I did not really like many Horsham people as they just seem to be content with being in Horsham ... and I just wanted to get out and be someone". She selected La Trobe, Bendigo for a number of reasons. These included its reputation, the fact that she did not think she could cope with living in a city the size of Melbourne, the better climate of Bendigo and the possibility that the Bendigo course would lead to employment in the Northern Territory. A teaching qualification also offered the possibility of careers in travel and tourism. The influence of a teacher she had in grade four was also important. 'Whenever I thought about it I just wanted to be like her" and when it was time to make a career choice she "thought is that really what I want to do for the rest of my life and I thought yes I still do".

Clare chose to study in Bendigo in preference to Melbourne as she was familiar with Bendigo City and it was closer to home. She anticipated being more comfortable in the country environment. A business studies course was selected because of a brother who was an accountant and because she liked accounting in high school. While happy with her decision she and some of her friends did have some misgivings. They noticed that the course at Bendigo was not as well recognised as some and consequently one had to "have the best marks". She added that if she had gone to Melbourne she might not have survived at all and ended up at home without any qualifications.

Maree chose Bendigo for similar reasons to Clare, namely the size of the university and fear of the larger size of Melbourne. She anticipated the transition to university study would be easier and the campus and life in Bendigo friendlier. In addition she was offered a cadetship to pursue her studies and her mother "sort of pushed me to apply for it". She was happy with her choice.

Penny enrolled at Bendigo because she wanted to get away from her family: "anywhere where there was no one near". Like Prue, Bendigo offered her the chance to escape from aspects of her life that she was keen to distance herself from. She had never considered going to Bendigo and had not applied to come here, but was offered a place via the telephone by the selection officer. She visited Bendigo, discussed the offer and was very impressed by the selection officer's helpful manner that extended to lending her mother his car to enable suitable accommodation to be found. She originally did a computing course because she was good at computing in school, but finished that in the middle of an economic downturn and an oversupply of graduates in her speciality. She then enrolled in primary teaching after discovering that primary teachers "were very nice people" through her involvement in the theatre company. She reasoned there would be a demand for people who "could use primary teachers who know their way around a computer and I love kids".

Importance of Prior Learning

All students did not greatly value their high school education as preparation for their university studies. This was due to a number of reasons. Partly it was related to conceptions of education that students had gained from prior socialisation They saw education as being almost

entirely instrumental. Coming from rural and working class backgrounds did not mean that there was not an appreciation of the broader values of education. However, at the same time it could mean that students found it difficult to appreciate an academic high school curriculum.

Also some of the subjects studied at school were unrelated to what was studied at university where a completely new speciality was undertaken. This was what happened in Celeste's case who after studying science at high school enrolled in a business degree. She did not however, find that she was behind everyone else. Tracey believed that her secondary education had not prepared her for university at all as the school environment was too academic and stressful. Here especially prior socialisation had fostered particular notions of learning and studying. Penny thought perhaps that her school preparation was less important in that "I was in an area that I was already good at it did not seem much of a leap for me".

Prue felt her secondary education had little influence compared with other life and work experiences. This was directly related to her own personal biography. She was twenty-nine years old and had raised a child when she enrolled at university. She had left school when she was achieving at the lowest of the class and had never written an essay. Yet she "ended up one of the highest achievers at the end of first year". She thought compared to her other life experiences and her desire to succeed, schooling was not as important in her success at university.

The extent to which the school and university teaching and learning approaches reinforced each other also varied. Some of the students commented on the big difference between university and school. Celeste noted the use of large lectures and being responsible for one's own learning compared to school "where the teachers are always on you to get your work

done and they would be there to help you and spend a lot of time helping us". Celeste thought that she had found school very sheltered and protected and "hand fed ... I suppose basically". Jasmine too found her family environment very sheltered. Again the rural dimension comes through. Coming from a farm, she had found the opportunities for interaction with a range of other people very limited. Her primary schooling had been important in this respect in providing some scope for interaction. But even this was still limited.

Jasmine found that secondary school's stress on research work was useful preparation and Celeste recalled that one teacher had tried to practice some of the teaching methods that would be used at university. However, for Jasmine the structured school day and the university stress on autonomy were stark contrasts. She thought university "was a bit of a jump. Well in first year I did not know what to expect. I sort of slacked off a bit and I went off the rails". In contrast Celeste noted that university was not as different with respect to teaching methods as she was led to believe. She found the approach was more relaxed and this was a relief. She coped with the university learning environment by using her self motivation and will to succeed.

Collegiate Experience

Learning

How did students learn? How well did their personal learning styles mesh with the learning environment of the university?

The formal learning environment as represented by lectures and tutorials was "most important as if you do not go to them you get behind, you get lost".. These students tried to always attended lectures and tutorials and endeavoured

to "try and take in as much as I possibly can". In addition one needed to ask many questions in tutorials.

Students' prior socialisation experiences and their personal biographies were influential in their learning styles. Thus Celeste noted that a particular weakness in hers was that she tended not to ask for help. She tried to do everything independently by consulting her own texts and those in the library. One wonders if Tracey had really grasped the essence of a university when she commented that one learnt not to miss lectures as:

> *they are definitely more important than tutorials because in primary teaching a lot of the time all you are doing is listening to someone else's tute and if you have done the prior reading then you just sit there and you think why did I even bother to turn up as it is not relevant.*

Even more of a worrying issue was Tracey's further elaboration that tutorials were often only attended to make sure that the mark for attendance was gained as "usually it does not teach you that much. They really only help if you are stuck on something that you know about from the lecture".

Penny believed that she learnt in a whole lot of different ways. It was important for her to have a good structure to what she was attempting to learn and to be told precisely what was expected of her. The three doing teacher education stressed the importance of teaching practicums "as you know that you can try but they will never replace going out and actually seeing things for yourself and learning how to do things for your self".

Jasmine noted that while lectures and tutorials were important, library based research was critical in her subject of accounting as "you need to keep up with cases through law and with research assignments". The set text did not cover everything. She also believed that she would make greater use of the Internet

in the future. For Prue perseverance and commitment were important in her learning style She just kept "at it until I take it in". This could entail seeking advice until she understood something.

Peer assisted learning was very important. When subjects had assignments students frequently got together to find books and other resources and had discussions on exercises that had to be done for class. This peer assisted learning was contrasted with "talking to a lecturer as a lecturer knows exactly what is going on but friends explain it that little bit more and sort of on your own level. Peers are very important".

Peer assisted learning often occurred where students lived. "When we get stuck we ring someone up and say we are coming around". Penny noted that discussing issues with others, especially those who held different views was important to her. This could enable her to confirm what she already knew and learn new things and perhaps change her views on some things. Tracey relied on friends because of what she perceived was a lack of staff availability in certain areas. She relied on friends to learn how to do assignments, when things were due and which people were reliable and who were not. Prue noted how Penny had spent approximately 30 hours assisting her with a computer assignment. In return students who had been given assistance were there to return the favour. Prue probably spoke for them all when she noted that "this is the best part of the place and the greatest part of learning I think comes from discussion downstairs [in the Student Union]".

There was also evidence of a gender dimension in the use of peer learning as Jasmine suggested that the male students used it to a greater extent than did females. The latter tended to work on their own, reasoning that the problem was "mine and I have to do it myself". Females were reluctant to join in a group and believed that learning was their responsibility.

Two other important issues emerged out of this discussion on learning. One was the issue of "writer's block". Prue's may have been linked to the fact that she had left school early and hence suffered more than most. However, she recounted the anguish that it caused her when it came to completing essays. Having done extensive research weeks prior to the assignment's due date she then had to rely on the sheer pressure of deadlines to force her to complete the work!

Motivation

Students' motivations stemmed very much from their past and present biographies, from what they valued and from what they hoped to achieve from university study. All were motivated to succeed but reasons for this varied. Some wanted to be successful because of extrinsic rewards whilst others were more intrinsically motivated. Thus Celeste's main motivation was to:

> *be some corporate big wig (laughs) and all my life I wanted to be a manager of some big company or something like that (laughs). Money is something that has always been a big motivator for me basically ...*

The selection of a degree in business was a reflection of these deeper motivations. This was partly related a desire to escape from the limited surroundings and circumstances of her rural background.

Jasmine's motivation was for independence that included financial independence. This was a trait that had its roots in her particular rural childhood circumstances and which have been commented on previously. She was motivated by a desire to be independent of her parents who had cared for her for an extended period. She also wanted her career to enable her to assist her parents financially after they had done so much for her. She also hoped her career would allow her to travel overseas and to

experience the world. Her desire for independence encouraged her to aim at higher grades "so I could get a job that would help me to travel overseas, rather than having to pay for it". Thus she wanted not to have to return to the family farm, she hoped to be able to financially assist her parents who were still on the farm and she hoped that her career would enable her to broaden her cultural and social horizons that had been limited by her rural upbringing.

Tracey and Penny and Prue's motivations were more intrinsic and less concerned with monetary aspects. This was related to their own career choices and biographies. They had realised that you did not enter primary teaching to become rich and famous - well rich anyway. In this sense they were like the primary teachers in Nias' (1989) study. Thus Tracey noted that monetary things were not the only things that were important to her, if they were "obviously I would not be doing this course". She anticipated the pleasures of being able to work with children and "it does not seem like a job at all". One wonders if Tracey's anticipatory socialisation would adequately prepare her for a teaching career. Just as important and worrying was Tracey's perspective on motivation. She stated "I don't like learning things, going out and researching things a lot unless it is for something that I am really interested in, like it's for an essay ... when you have the motivation behind you to do something is when you learn the best".

Penny was motivated by traditional values like commitment, honesty and being open with people. For Prue, university life was a dramatic change from her past: it was an escape from working class city circumstances and she had no desire to return there ever! She loved university and was determined to do something with her life. Taking a degree was very much purposeful thing as to "be a teacher ... is my life's ambition". Also she

believed that it was innate in her not to entertain the fear of failure. She was also motivated by wanting to do well for her two children:

> *It is for them as well ... I suppose for the girls just to set a bit of an example. I think they will grow up better people if they have a Mum who has a career rather than a Mum who sits at home. It gives them a better outlook on life.*

There are some interesting paradoxes here. For one person coming to Bendigo was an escape from the city. For others coming to Bendigo was an escape from the country. As in most things perhaps the idea of rural is again somewhat relative.

Career Plans

Students' career plans were an extension of why they enrolled at La Trobe, Bendigo in the first place and other facets of their individual biographies. They were linked to what motivated them and inspired them.

Prue's main ambition was to teach primary school. She extended this to encompass the possibility that it would be good to return and pursue an academic career in the School of Education. Penny presently wanted to be a teacher but was not sure for how long. She wanted to "inspire other people to do things and help people find their paths through what they want". She admitted that she would like one day to try writing as a career as she loved this.

Celeste was similar to Jasmine and found it hard to envisage her precise career plans at present. She thought that it could centre on starting her own business or accountancy practice as she could "see myself in my own business especially after my parents have been in business for so long and I know the advantages and disadvantages". She believed that one advantage of her own business would be the freedom to operate it how she desired. She also thought about

working for a large company in Melbourne or a similar city. Jasmine's career plans included at some time working overseas. Again she stated that her parents were not well-off financially and were still paying for their farm. They had assisted her even to the extent of buying her a car. One of her career plans included obtaining a well-paid position to enable her to "give extra money to them" as they had "been incredibly good to me".

Reference Groups

University and externally based reference groups were important in the total learning environment of these students. Reference groups were used to see where one's life was heading and the point one had reached in that life. They informed you if you were on track and up to standard. They could provide motivation as well as specific advice on how to cope and succeed.

Working for a firm, as part of a cadetship, was important in providing reference groups. This meant that working life flowed over to university life. It meant that you were more responsible in approaches to study, more conservative and business like in dress. Tracey noted the importance of the teachers she was placed with on Teaching Practicums. She "wanted to be really like them ... you model yourself like the teachers you want to be like ... people who really enjoy what they are doing and have succeeded already".

Individuals who had completed the course related their experience of the course and what was important in obtaining employment. Jasmine stated that one very important piece of advice that was offered was that "you do not necessarily have to have the best marks as long as you are consistent or have shown a gradual improvement in your academic grading". One's

fellow students also stressed the importance of having a part-time job and some form of community involvement, in addition to good grades, in obtaining employment.

Students older than oneself were more highly motivated and committed and had a better grasp of what was taught. They provided motivation, inspiration and help.

Parents and siblings were also important as reference groups. For example Jasmine observed her parents' employment. This influenced her to work hard and so avoid returning to the family farm. She was also keen to please her parents by succeeding. They were extremely happy when she went to university being only the second one in the family to do so. They were very supportive of her high aspirations.

More abstract groups of successful people were reference groups for others. Students were determined to escape from what they saw as rural backwardness. This was particularly the case for Tracey who compared herself "to someone who really wanted to make it". These groups of people were the real reason she was at university; to obtain a good education, to better herself and to succeed. These people who had succeeded provided inspiration and determination for her.

Prue similarly wanted to succeed but was not so aggressively ambitious as Tracey. Her reference groups provided a similar function to Jasmine's. She looked at the life she had left behind and the people who made up some of that life. She noted how depressing life was for many of these people. She was glad to have escaped from such circumstances and keen not return. She thought of how people she knew still worked in factories and lived a life that was not the best for them or their children. University at Bendigo had given her a completely new and different life. She thought that one

had to "work and achieve your ambitions rather than just sit there and stagnate". Penny compared herself similarly to friends from her past and she noted how far she had progressed by comparison.

The students were their own reference groups too as they competed against themselves and this was often of most importance. They examined how much effort they expended on their studies and judged themselves on that basis. Penny and Prue noted this aspect with Penny stating "I am really competing against me more than anyone". It was also the case that the students were not necessarily critical of their own lives and did not have to compare themselves to anyone. Celeste noted that "I know what I am about and know where I am going. I do not try and be like anyone else you know to try and fit in. I am passed that I suppose". Perhaps this indicated that they had reached a certain stage of self confidence and maturity and were ready to defend what they had personally decided.

Institutional Environment

Values that the University Espouses

Students were unanimous that the university stressed learning. It aimed for students to succeed and graduate. While some lecturers were not as helpful as might have been desired, the majority were thought to be keen to provide assistance and ensure students graduated. Prue was adamant that the university "definitely values academic achievement, that is right at the top". She cited as evidence for this the fact that some of the staff were already talking in the second year of the course to the top achieving students about whether they should enrol in the honour's program. But in addition to this she believed that "it values difference because as I say there are so many different people and they are all accepted and as well as being accepted ... the difference is valued. So they value people and academic achievement".

Celeste noted that the institution valued personal relationships in the context of high quality academic work. It valued "relaxed teaching" that is students received the same education as they would at Melbourne University and were taught the same material but:

> *The lecturers and the tutors and all that [were] more interested in you I think as a person not just as a student sitting out there. I think they take more interest in why you are there and what you are doing and that sort of thing. I think that is possibly the main thing they would value.*

Jasmine perceived the university as "very centred on the students and they want their students to do their best". She noted that besides the normal teaching and learning aspects of the university, Student Services were also very important with assistance with study skills, employment advice and resume writing assistance. Both Jasmine and Penny provided specific examples of the university's response to problems that female students had in computing. Here the university developed a special program for females with their own lecturer. The university also went out of its way to provide special courses for students with particular needs for example, on how to cope with stress.

For Prue the whole of the university experience "was really important". She believed it was necessary to take a long term view of how learning occurred at university and how one progressed. She stated:

> *I sit her and I think especially first year and even second year, you come in and get all this information fed into you and it does not make any sense until you go out on rounds and then you sit there and it clicks ... I find a lot of the theory that you do not understand until you are out in schools and it comes together.*

Tracey, perhaps innocently and naively, thought that the university experience provided the opportunity to look at many theories and approaches and the aim was to blend them all and to make up one's own.

Penny however, noted the disparity between what the formal university environment stressed in lectures and what the lecturers did themselves. Lecturers often did not practise what they preached. She had already completed one qualification at the university, had undertaken courses in three schools, had attended the university for a longer period and thus was able to take a broader view of the core values of the university. Her's was not quite as sanguine a picture. Perceptively, Penny noted that the institution had changed quite dramatically since she completed her first qualification when it was a College of Advanced Education. Then she believed it was much more community based and more focussed on everyone succeeding. Consequently there was much effort put in by the academic staff to ensure that everyone succeeded. She feared, now that it was part of a larger networked university, that it was less personal and more concerned only with the academic side of the university experience. Academic work was viewed as more important than the support networks and the social aspect of the institution.

Non-Formal Aspects of University Life

For these students the whole of university social life and extra-curricular activities were important. Celeste noted that social life was important because "in a way [it] is a learning area". Part of this stemmed from having to schedule work and study commitments to enable participation in both.

Orientation Week activities were especially useful in introducing students to each other and breaking down barriers between people. The people met during these activities could be called upon at a later time when personal crises arose or when one felt "stressed out and you alway have someone to go to".

For Jasmine the Orientation Barbecue marked an important critical phase in her growth and maturity as a person. For her the whole step in coming to

university was very bewildering as on the first day she found herself on her own, as she was the only one from her high school who had enrolled in Business Studies. She described her experience as follows:

> *We had a bit of a barbecue the first day and we are in a queue waiting to get some sausages and I turned around and said 'hello' to the person behind me and I introduced myself and years before I would never have done that. I have been close friends with two of those people since. I am glad that I did that sort of thing or I would not be mixing now.*

Living with other students in the Student Residences was also very significant. It provided a source of emotional support when life was not progressing smoothly. As one noted: "but what is great with living with people is that you just go out into the loungeroom and just talk and there will always be someone out there and you just go off and have a conversation and you forget it".

Talking in the Student Union was one of the most important non-formal aspects of university life. It was important because "a lot of information [was] exchanged". This could be in the form of photocopies and ideas. Talk also provided crucial emotional support to persevere when one had difficulties be they academic or personal. Penny noted that when Prue had difficulty with a computer assignment she went and provided assistance to her. Prue believed that:

> *everyone seems to hit a crisis ... everyone who comes through seems to hit one whether it is something to do with home (I mean that is mature age like me falling pregnant) and they seem to hit an area and they are not too sure whether they can keep going*

It was usually friends, colleagues and fellow students who "can talk you through a rut" (as opposed to university counsellors) as they had experienced the crisis themselves. Thus personal support networks were vital in the overall university learning environment. Talk among friends and colleagues was at the heart of these. The location of this talk was often in the Student Union.

Sport and other interests such as playing a musical instrument were an important part in students' lives. These activities enabled students to relax, escape and forget the troubles of the moment. In some instances the sport or the music had been part of the student's life since childhood. In some cases it had been a school teacher who had encouraged the individual to take up one or both. Tracey noted:

> *If I ever get stressed I will always play the keyboard and I have been doing that since six years of age. So I will go off and play my keyboard and everyone knows that when I am playing my keyboard yes, stay away from me.*

Jasmine found the Balls organised by the Student Association very important. These were occasions to reinforce already formed friendships "not necessarily to meet new people as half of them are off their nut and they will not remember you the next day (laughs)". These on campus social gatherings were a welcome addition to off campus events such as going to a night club. They were a "fun time". Jasmine joined the basketball club but had not joined other sporting clubs as she made the decision to join external sporting clubs "so I could meet people outside uni". She thought that social skills she developed out of these involvements were important to her in being an accountant "as some people think that being an accountant they sit in their office and crunch numbers all day [but] you have to meet with clients and you will have to be able to communicate with bosses on the work you have been doing".

Prue and Penny commented on the informal aspects of university life in the form of student culture. Prue believed that this put a high emphasis on sport and 'barrels" while Penny (and she had been President of the Student Association and involved in the Student Union) thought that the student body had become very apathetic about most things.

Significant Others

Significant others could be staff, friends, colleagues or people external to the university. All of these could act in a positive or negative way. In an institution that dealt with large numbers of people it was almost inevitable that not all people would relate to each other in a positive manner. Significant others linked in with other aspects of these students' biographies as for example, in the case of Prue who wanted to achieve something with her life as her significant others were doing with theirs.

Tracey had experienced academic staff who had both positive and negative influences on her. Some staff appeared so busy that it was very hard to relate to them from a student's point of view. In some cases the difficulty was in locating the staff let alone attempting to relate to them! Positive experiences involved staff who "talk to you like you are an adult which you do not get in high school". These were the concerned staff who could be approached for assistance whenever you needed it and who worried over your performance. They took an interest in you as a person and this extended outside the university.

In Penny's case one particular lecturer in Anthropology had inspired her and enabled her to see things in a totally different light. However, both she and Jasmine had experienced very negative significant others in Information Science where it was their belief the staff did not seem to want to "help those who were having trouble". The effect, of this in Penny's case, was to increase her determination to excel in spite of their treatment of her!

Friends were very important significant others for these students. For Jasmine it was two friends who were in the same year as herself. She described one of these as very studious. Her influence was that she provided encouragement and incentive to succeed. Studying for the same degree meant that these significant others were able to use each other to determine if they were working effectively

and to capacity and were meeting the standards required. They provided mutual support of an academic and social kind.

For Prue, a friend and now a member of staff herself, was an important significant other. She was, in Prue's words, her "role model". The influence extended back to when they had both started the course together. Then, when Prue had a severe personal crisis, this person offered encouragement and assistance. She gave strong support to return and continue her studies and helped her to be re-admitted into the course. Prue recalled "I can remember her saying to me of course you can cope. Get back there and have a go ... If everyone was like her it would be wonderful". Prue noted that there were other important staff members too - "there are more here whom I admire than what I don't". Most of them were very approachable "especially if you have got a problem. I mean heaps of them have got families and they are all achieving something".

Tracey's house mates were also significant others as were some of the students doing the same degree. These provided support when struggling with an assignment, helped in relationship crises such as boyfriend problems and the emotional issues that went with that. She noted that "if it was not for people being friendly and wanting to help you out you really would not have that motivation to be still here and would have left long ago".

Not all of these students had university based significant others. For example, Celeste found it hard to think of any significant other people at the university because "I suppose that is part of my independence. I do not rely on others and so there is probably not anyone that is important to me". This independence was a recurring feature of Celeste's biography.

Improvements

The crucial message of Chickering and Reisser (1993) is that powerful learning environments can be provided without large amounts of resources and physical

facilities. This claim is to an extent borne out by these student's perceptions of what could be improved with the university including aspects of its physical facilities. Prue noted that:

> *It is a very pleasant place to be. It is wonderful. It is the grounds, the buildings, the setting, it all adds to the atmosphere. It is not a stressful place to come to. I find it fairly relaxed besides the lecture halls! But how relaxed can you be in a room with 150?*

Melissa too believed the physical attractiveness of the campus was a major attraction of the university. She noted:

> *It is a very relaxed sort of nice place to be: like it is not all concrete like some universities ... I think the environment around here is a real positive for the place. It is really nice, you can always find somewhere nice to sit and stuff like that.*

Penny too believed that it was "a nice physical campus". She was able to compare it with other universities, like Melbourne, as she had worked there on vacations. She thought it was an optimum size and noted that "I do not think you would want to get too much bigger". While general happy with the physical environment, Prue wondered, if the interior colour scheme could be more mellow. She also made the observation that the lecture theatres could be made much more comfortable.

The teacher education students were highly critical of the recent relocation of the Learning Resources Centre and were all strongly in favour of it being returned to its original position within the School of Education building. Prue believed that previously its previous location had created a special atmosphere that was much more conducive to sustained work than that created in its new location. The latter was seen as unconducive to serious study "as it is too sterile and I can't concentrate there and can't drink coffee there when I work".

Echoing comments made by Penny, Prue noted that while she was "fairly happy with her School now, she worried about foreshadowed changes. She and others noted that it was often very hard to have access to some academic staff because of what appeared were onerous workloads. Anything which worsened the situation would be intolerable. Further reductions in staff numbers would mean students would have difficulty finding anyone to talk to about their work and "this was a major worry".

Tutorial size was becoming too large and this it was believed was why attendance was becoming so poor. Students believed that smaller tutorials and more opportunities for one to one tuition would improve the learning environment.

Tracey suggested that improved communications in her School were needed especially when classes had to be cancelled or rescheduled and with respect to assignment details. Tracey noted that "a few of the lecturers should not be dragons (laughs)" and could be more approachable and less intimidating. This coupled with greater efforts to explain subject matter and the use of more audio visual material in classes would assist. Other than these kind of issues "it is a really good uni" commented Tracey.

Melissa would have liked more access to personnel in Student Services at peak times such as at examinations and when assignments were due. She suggested that a higher and more visible profile would encourage students to utilise Student Services to a greater extent. She noted that it was hard to know just how to proceed with making improvements in written work as "we can't hand in drafts and that sort of thing". Here again socialisation and expectations that were fostered at secondary school had created a set of expectations that could not be fulfilled at University.

While pointing out that she was happy with the overall nature of the learning environment that was provided at the university, Prue made the point (and this would applied to the other students except Penny) that this could have been partly due to her lack of experience of other environments with which to make comparisons. She stated:

> *I have never been to another campus as this is my first experience with a university and maybe if I went somewhere else like Monash ... I might have higher expectations but I have been pleased with the whole lot. Like you go to some of the primary and high schools over in the Western suburbs and you come out here and it is bliss it is.*

Again the nature of prior socialisation experiences is highlighted. In this case they acted as a comparative reference group and assist students to judge the value of their current learning environment.

The importance of positive interactions with committed others were important in fostering a positive learning environment. Prue noted that "what makes for a successful learning environment is the atmosphere. Besides the teacher a lot of it is the atmosphere". A positive atmosphere in the tutorial classes was essential and while generally present this was not always so. Sometimes no one wanted to learn as they were suffering the ill-effects of all-night drinking. Consequently there was no positive discussion and nothing productive ensued. An opposite situation and a committed group produced fantastic results.

Melissa stressed that individual students had to assume responsibility to be successful. Students had to be "prepared to attend university things ... you have to put in a bit in order to get as much out as you can yourself". Students had to ensure that they attended classes, were prepared "to go that bit extra" and attend functions that were organised. If a student "just sat back by yourself and came to lectures and went home ... I do not think you would do that well ... I think that you have to be prepared to get involved in things that are going on and stuff like that".

Jasmine also noted that any improvements in the learning environment that existed also depended to a large extent on the students themselves. Students had to "try and do your best". Again this was a theme that had been with her since childhood and one that had remained with her. Students had to take advantage of the opportunities that the university provided, to take the initiative, to ask for assistance when it was required and not just to "expect it to happen".

Jasmine had found the university experience to be very positive and had "enjoyed my time her very much so, especially meeting new people as well as learning for my degree. I would do it again if I had my time over again". She noted perceptively that the university could not realistically expect to "cater to every single person". Jasmine could not think of anything she would like to see improved.

Penny's perspective added a new an important dimension to what contributed to a positive learning environment. Positive interactions with one's fellow students were seen as very important. However, given the nature of student sub-cultures, this did not always occur. Penny recalled her own involvement in student politics and extra curricular activities such as the Theatre Company and all the unpleasantness and bitterness that went with it. She noted that when she was President of the Student Union many were happy to complain, but offered little in terms of constructive contributions. She laughed when she related that they now had four people doing the job she did single handedly!

Conclusion

Responding to the suggestions of the editor of ***The Times Higher Education Supplement*** of December 13, 1996, this paper provides data on aspects of rural students' lives and the student experience of a rural university. The study highlights McNay's (1994) observations on the importance of students'

background and Chickering and Reisser's (1993) who suggest that all institutions can create powerful learning environments. Keeping in mind the limitations of this study the following conclusions can be drawn.

Learning environments of students extend forwards and backwards in their individual biographies. The learning environment is not only a product of the university as currently experienced. Students' prior socialisation influences how they perceive the university experience and responses they make to it. Motivations, attitudes to study and learning are formed in childhood and at school and remain with students. In some cases prior socialisation contributes positively and in other cases negatively to students' response to university.

A desire to escape from childhood circumstances and surroundings were key driving forces that led these students to university. It was not necessarily only a desire to better oneself but also in one case a desire to be away from less than congenial family situations. Observing the people that inhabited the same world as themselves was a powerful stimulus to attend university and to escape from the closed and stultifying environment (and in some cases financially impoverished circumstances) that constituted their childhood. The reverse side of this was that a strong desire to repay parents who had been financially supportive was a powerful motivation to do well in one's university studies.

Selecting La Trobe, Bendigo involved a combination of factors. Some of these were to do with reputation of the course but there was also a belief by some that perhaps other universities had better reputations. Overwhelmingly though it was felt that the smaller size of the university would be more appropriate for them. It was also believed that the size of the City would make the transition to university life much easier. There were also elements of sheer chance involved in the decision to enrol at La Trobe, Bendigo. This coincided with a flexible and open entry policy and helpful and friendly selection and admissions officers.

The actual physical environment of the university was seen as supportive of academic endeavour by students. The students appreciated the pleasant physical surrounds and noted that compared to others it had an inviting presence. Some observed that they did not have much to compare it with. Had they done so then perhaps the comparison would not have been as favourable.

Students were happy with the teaching and learning environment but noted that with changes in staffing and resources the situation was starting to deteriorate. Staff were becoming busier, harder to find and consult. Lecture and tutorial sizes were becoming larger.

This raises a wider issue connected with statements of Chickering and Reisser (1993). They claim that it is possible for all institutions to create powerful learning environments without the need for massive capital and physical resources. The campus that this study occurred at is relatively new. The oldest buildings date to the 1960s and some are only less than ten years old. That said it is not a lavish campus and is not generously equipped or funded.

However, the question that must be posed is what is the minimum level of physical and capital resources that must be provided for an effective learning environment to occur? What level below which must resources not be allowed to fall? Australian Governments will only be too happy to seize on comments like those of Chickering and Reisser (1993) to justify cutbacks in funding especially in rural and less favoured locations. The issue of resources and their influence on achievement levels is a contested area as witnessed by recent research of (Greenwald et al. 1996a and 1996b and Hanushek, 1996).

The foregoing aside it seems possible from these students' comments to achieve relatively high levels of satisfaction with tertiary education without massive levels of support. It is of course a relative matter and much bound up with individual

perspectives and prior expectations and socialisation. As the students themselves remarked they do not have much to compare it with. Other students with more varied backgrounds may find it less positive. However, in recent externally conducted evaluations of student satisfaction levels some of the campus' courses, achieved the nation's highest rankings.

On the release of the above research the vice chancellor of one of Australia's premier university's, in an outbreak of urbism if not arrogance, claimed that the above results were only to be expected. Students in lesser universities (and this included all of Australia's rurally located institutions) would rate their courses more highly as the students were not as intelligent and critical! In fact are policy makers and politicians taking advantage of the good natures of rural citizens to effectively short-change them in the provision of first class educational facilities?

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